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US spy agencies expand intelligence efforts; still face clamor for better data

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How good are US intelligence agencies at figuring out what goes on in the world?

After all, information on such things as Soviet SS-20 missile launchers and the intentions of Islamic militia often greatly influences United States officials pondering hard decisions.

The quality of US intelligence assessments declined during the late 1960s and early '70s, former and current intelligence officials say. But in recent years the perceptive ability of intelligence agencies has been markedly strengthened, these sources assert.

"We're better, we work on a broader range of subjects today. We still have imperfections we're working on," says a senior intelligence source.

Current Washington debate over the data-producing effectiveness of the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and other US intelligence arms in many ways marks the closing of a circle.

In the late '60s and early '70s, the political climate and revelations of controversial spy operations put US intelligence agencies into disrepute. Congress set up oversight committees to keep a close eye on the CIA, and intelligence budgets were slashed. At one point, the number of CIA analysts studying the Soviet economy fell to 50, from a high of 200.

Sometime during the Carter administration, things began to change. Intelligence budgets quietly started to grow again.

"This turnaround was led in some degree by Congress. It accelerated in a major way in the early '80s," said Adm. Bobby Inman, former deputy director of the CIA, in a recent interview.

But with this rejuvenation have come demands for better performance. Policymakers today want more detail in their intelligence reports than ever before. When a terrorist bomb leveled the US Marine barracks in Lebanon, for instance, some members of Congress complained of an intelligence failure, saying the marines should have been warned about a pending attack.

Demanding such specificity may be asking for too much, a House Intelligence Committee report concludes. While the CIA didn't pinpoint the coming attack, it did warn repeatedly of possible vehicle-bomb attacks in Lebanon, official sources say.

Overall, the ability of US intelligence to decipher world events has been greatly strengthened in recent years, according to government officials. With bigger budgets have come more analysts. Contacts with outside experts have been expanded. Training standards and travel time for those who pore each day over raw intelligence data have been vastly increased, these sources say.

The number of long-term reports, dealing with subjects such as possible Soviet weapons of the future, has been increased and will top 700 this year. National Intelligence Estimates, large reports with contributions from numerous agencies, now feature dissenting opinions in the body of the text.

"We're trying to be more forthcoming with policy people about the quality of our sources, and the level of confidence in our judgments," a senior intelligence official says.

Critics are skeptical of the effects of these reforms. Allan Goodman, a former high CIA official who is now a Georgetown University associate dean, feels recent changes have had only a marginal effect on the quality of intelligence.

The US intelligence community, Mr. Goodman complains, does not study its failures. Frank rating of sources is done only in the most important reports, he says, and Central Intelligence Director William Casey has altered reports to fit his preconceived political views.

Congress, for its part, stands in between these poles of opinion.

A House Intelligence Committee report, issued earlier this year, concluded that "a number of steps have been taken to improve the quality of intelligence. Nevertheless, shortcomings in analysis and collection continue to appear."

Analysis of the rate of growth of Soviet defense spending is one subject that in particular has recently caused problems in the US intelligence community.

The CIA estimates that Soviet spending on weapons has been relatively flat in recent years, around 2 percent annually. The DIA believes it has been between 5 and 8 percent.

But focusing on this number may magnify the differences between the agencies, some say.

Still, "there are relatively few disagreements on what the Soviets have deployed in the strategic arena," says one official.